

October 8, 2023
Thanksgiving Sunday / Creation 5

Meditation: "Gratitude"

Does everyone know what day tomorrow is? (*Thanksgiving*) How about this past week – September 29 to October 6? (*Sukkot*) Sukkot is the Jewish harvest festival that lasts an entire week and it starts on the full moon, which was the 29th of September this year. Imagine for a moment that you live in Jerusalem about 2500 or 3000 years ago. You live in a walled city built atop a mountain. Every inch of land is given to housing, markets, the palace, and the temple. Where is your plot of land on which you grow your food? Outside the city walls. It takes you time to travel there and time to travel back and yet, at harvest, time is of the essence. So, you build a temporary shelter, a sukkah, at the edge of your field to live in while you harvest your crop. That way, you can work from sunup until sundown. This is why our Bible calls Sukkot the festival of booths or the festival of tabernacles, after the temporary huts or sukkahs that were built. During the modern observance of Sukkot, people still build sukkahs to remind them of the time when their ancestors lived in them during the harvest. But the sukkah reminds them not only of the temporary dwellings their ancestors lived in at harvest time, but also of the temporary dwellings their ancient ancestors lived in during their 40 years of wandering in the wilderness at the time of Moses.

Over the past several weeks the Old Testament lessons from the book of Exodus detail the escape from Egypt, the crossing of the Red Sea, the giving of the manna and the quail, and the water that sprang from the rock at Horeb when Moses hit it with his staff. They were about the creation of a nation, and the creation of a people who trusted in, had faith in God. In today's reading from Deuteronomy we are urged not to forget. Do not forget the Lord your God by failing to keep his commandments. Do not forget the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, who led you through the wilderness, who made water flow from flint rock, and fed you in the wilderness with manna. When you enter the land of milk and honey, and have become prosperous and have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and when your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, do not exalt yourself and say to yourself that my power and the might of my own hand have gotten this wealth.

Yet isn't that precisely what our society has done? We are wealthy beyond the wildest imaginings of ancient societies and we deny that God had anything to do with it. We even deny that God is. We have gotten this by the sweat of our brow and owe a debt of gratitude to no-one but ourselves.

Gratitude. Now there's a word that appears much in a new book written by sociologist Margaret Visser, *The Gift of Thanks: The roots, persistence, and paradoxical meanings of a social ritual*. She says that we live in an era in which we feel a sense of entitlement to all manner of things. Rights, we call them. We have a right to vote, a right to medical care, a right to a standard of living that exceeds what the royalty of old had, and the students at UWO feel they have a right to party, which I suppose is better than the Americans' right to carry dozens of loaded automatic assault rifles. We are entitled to these things. And because we are entitled, the gift is no longer a gift, and therefore needs no thanks.

Gratitude, she says, is the moral memory of humankind. I think what she means by this is that in giving thanks we remember that what we take for granted, what we feel we are entitled to, is really a gift, a gift for which we owe a debt of gratitude; for to say thanks, is to humble oneself and to acknowledge a debt. Gratitude cannot be exacted by the giver; it has to be acknowledged by the recipient of the gift.

Those of us who have been parents know how difficult it can be to teach children to say thank you. It is harder still to make them feel gratitude, and yet it is important for us to learn to feel it, for it changes us. To give thanks means that we have to bring to our conscious awareness that we know that we are not alone; that we are not entirely self-sufficient; that we depend on others; and that we have reason to acknowledge the kindness of others. At its root, gratitude is about a relationship, a relationship in love as Visser would say. It is about a relationship because it is about acknowledging to ourselves, and then sharing with others our happiness. And that is not good just for ourselves, but it changes the one to whom we give thanks. Genuine gratitude starts a cycle of gratitude because the recipient of gratitude feels blessed and becomes more inclined to view others with the eyes of grace and to offer gratitude to others.

Today we gather to give thanks to God for all that we have, and all that we are. We acknowledge, first to ourselves, and then to God how privileged we are, and lest you think we aren't, think about these statistics. About eight hundred million people in the world today suffer from chronic malnutrition. Among them, 14 million children suffer from acute malnutrition. Almost 6 million Canadians living in the 10 provinces are food insecure. 1.3 million Canadian children live in poverty in 2021, the last year for which I could find statistics. Privilege, my mother taught me, carries with it responsibility. The gratitude I feel to God for a life of abundance, predisposes me to feel gracious towards, even a sense of responsibility towards those in our society and in our world who lack even the basics of life, safe and adequate food and water. I wonder, what can I, what and we do about that? Could we plant a garden along Hill Street to supply the Dorchester food bank with fresh produce? These are thoughts that I carry with me today.

So today, give thanks. It costs you nothing but some humility. It is good for your soul. And it may just change the world for the better, one person at a time. Amen.